Unexpected Instructions at JFK Autopsy

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One of three Navy pathologists who conducted the autopsy on President John F. Kennedy said in testimony released Friday that Kennedy's personal physician, an admiral, gave them unexpected instructions on how to do the work.

In particular, the pathologist — backed by one of his colleagues — testified in 1996 that Adm. George Burkley instructed them to ignore Kennedy's adrenal glands, which are located near the kidneys, and not to discuss their condition with anyone. Kennedy had been suspected of suffering an adrenaline insufficiency known as Addison's disease, characterized by weight loss and extreme weakness, but had long denied it.

Dr. J. Thornton Boswell also testified that Burkley took the half of Kennedy's brain remaining after his assassination and carried it away in a bucket.

Boswell testified before the U.S. Assassination Records Review Board, which Friday released its entire medical file on the 1963 assassination in Dallas. The file shed no substantial new light on the controversy about whether the assassination resulted from a conspiracy, but did produce new insights.

All three pathologists were questioned by the review board and stuck by their original reports — saying Kennedy was killed by one rifle shot in the head and one in the neck, both fired from the rear. Boswell testified that a wound in the back of Kennedy's neck, described by many conspiracy theorists as an exit wound, was "clearly a wound of entrance."

After Kennedy's body was flown back to the Washington area from Dallas, it was taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital for autopsy. Boswell, Dr. James Humes and Dr. Pierre Finck conducted the autopsy.

Jeremy Gunn, the assassination review board's counsel, asked Boswell: "Was it your impression in 1963 that Dr. Burkley was supervising what was going on in the autopsy room?" Boswell replied: "We were acting on certain of his instructions."

Humes testified Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy were at the hospital. She had said she was not going to leave without Kennedy's body, Humes said, and Burkley "was anxious that that period be shortened." But Humes did concur that Burkley had given the order on ignoring the adrenals.

Conspiracy theorists have contended that Kennedy's brain was stolen. But Boswell insisted there was no theft — that he simply gave the brain to Burkley. The admiral then presumably turned the brain over to Robert Kennedy. Fearful it might be used as a curiosity, Robert Kennedy reportedly disposed of it — perhaps burying it with the rest of his brother's body.

The review board, in releasing the records, bemoaned "the incompleteness of the autopsy record and the suspicion caused by the shroud of secrecy that has surrounded the records that do exist." The board said attempts to protect the privacy of the Kennedy family, although well-intentioned, have left a legacy of "distrust and suspicion."

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